Maori manuscripts in public collections

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A great body of manuscript literature in the Maori language survives today in public libraries and archives in New Zealand. Such texts represent significant documents in the history of the country. In the past, knowledge of and access to these materials have, by virtue of their arrangement, been limited to librarians, archivists and tenacious researchers. Until very recently Maori manuscripts in our archival institutions have not received the attention they deserve. This article outlines the origin and collection of these manuscripts and evaluates the accessioning, preservation and presentation of Maori manuscripts in major public libraries and archives.

The manuscripts: a brief history

Following the establishment of a suitable orthography, and missionary tuition in reading and writing, the Maori people fast became literate in their own language, and that literacy ensured written documentation of Maori opinion and tradition thereafter. By the 1830s writing had become something of a passion. Literacy was not just an exciting new skill but was applied with effect. It increased comprehension of the Pakeha world, enhanced individual prestige, and was an efficient means of communication.[1] Probably our first manuscript legacy in Maori results from the prolific output of letters which began in the 1830s and continued until late in the century. These are apparent today in several manuscript collections, and in great number, for example, in the McLean papers in the Alexander Turnbull Library and the Grey Collection in the Auckland Public Library.

The most abundant quantity of manuscript material, however, was to survive from the writings of those Maori people who, in the late 1840s, were apprehensive of the future of their culture and began recording their own traditional history and customs[2]. To judge from the store now in archival custody, the amount written from that time on was substantial, and it came from many tribal areas. Words which held so much importance in an oral tradition were naturally valued too when written down, and, although the authority of the writings did not supplant (and perhaps never has supplanted) the impact of the oral tradition, written records nevertheless came to have their own distinction.

The style of the old, the oratorical, was not wholly the style of the new, the literary. The influence of missionaries, the Bible and other translated literature, and numerous innovations, were to bring changes to the traditional Maori text — and not just in style. The content was sometimes carefully adjusted for a particular readership. Writing was not always just to create a personal record. For, in the 1850s, the persuasion to literacy amongst Maori elders was supported by many Pakeha eager to know of Maori pre-history and the oral traditions. And, in typically acquisitive fashion, these Pakeha wanted to keep the paper on which information was offered. A demand sprang up for written accounts of history and traditions, and some of the energy put into writing was no doubt commensurate with encouragement and reward.

The government unwittingly may have funded the interest of some of its employees. Sir George Grey, of course, was a notable collector of Maori manuscript texts, along with Edward Shortland, John White, and later, Percy Smith. These men were on the look-out for material while in office. Their enthusiasm ran to providing writing tools, paper and money to boost the literary flow. They attracted Maori scribes from all over the country — Te Rangikaaheke of Te Arawa, Aperahama Taonui of Ngaapuhi, and Maatene Te Whiwhi of Ngaati Toa, to name a few of those whose writings remain in manuscript collections in our libraries. Others in diverse occupations and over the whole country took up the search — including Richard Taylor in Whanganui, William Colenso and Samuel Locke in Hawkes Bay, J. F. H. Wohlers and Herries Beattie in the South Island. Manuscript texts of songs, genealogies, tribal traditions, customs, and esoteric lore were passed by these collectors into publishers' hands and appeared in print with and without translation, edited and expurgated, reconstructed and rewritten. We are familiar with the results — Grey's *Nga Mahi a Nga Tupuna* and Taylor's *Te Ika a Maui*, for example. In this manner considerable manuscript material arrived in Pakeha hands over a long period of time from many tribal areas. Many such texts came to be deposited in libraries; how much more was written and retained in private hands we cannot be sure, but certainly Maori people were using this new recording system on their own account.

Apart from the attention of these individual collectors, public offices were also generating and gathering writing in Maori — letters to governments, petitions, articles to newspapers and periodicals. And, from 1865, the Native Land Court gave rise to a volume of written records, including not only the Court minutes, but minutes taken by Maori assessors and by claimants and their families during Court proceedings, and minutes from local Maori committee sessions held prior to the Court. Such records, all in Maori, contained a wealth of testimony on tribal histories and traditions. Many of them are extant, some in National Archives.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought to light more material, mainly at the instigation of the new ethnographers and enthusiasts such as Elsdon Best, Edward Tregear, Leslie Kelly, George Graham, Te Rangi Hiiroa and Apirana Ngata. The Polynesian Society, formed in 1892, was their forum. This group of people espoused the preservation of the manuscript heritage of the Maori and stated their intention of placing on record all available matter regarding pre-European conditions. They congratulated the Maori people for having had the foresight to commit to writing their racial information, and then set about ensuring that these records would survive as the skeletons of the race — because some of them were doubtful whether anything else would. They took their informants' manuscripts into print and the early volumes of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* reflect the working partnership of Pakeha and Maori in this regard. Maori elders and chiefs like Takaanui Tarakawa of Te Arawa, Haamiora Pio of Ngaati Awa and Hare Hongi of Ngaapuhi contributed manuscripts of traditional history, songs and custom for publication. Much of the original material produced and collected via the Polynesian Society is now in store in the Turnbull Library.

The assiduous interest and collecting by Pakeha enthusiasts undoubtedly were responsible for a good proportion of Maori writing and its preservation in public institutions. But writing was (and continues to be) done for family or tribal interest. The manuscripts which formed the basis of Percy Smith's *The Lore of the Whare Wananga* are believed to have been written during meetings of elders in the Wairarapa in the 1860s. Likewise the large collection of papers belonging to Himiona Kaamira (now held in the Auckland Institute and Museum Library and Auckland University Library) exemplifies written texts produced from meetings of elders held in

the Hokianga to discuss traditional history around the turn of the century. Publications from the early years of this century indicate that other manuscript material was about, for example, in the texts gathered by Apirana Ngata for *Nga Moteatea*. While the literary activity of the Maori people who were in a sense apprenticed to prominent Pakeha collectors is now abundantly evident in its store in libraries and archives, as the above examples show written records were kept by many Maori people for their own use, some of which have been deposited in libraries, many of which may still exist in private hands.

Michael King, in *Tihe Mauri Ora*, surveying Maori attitudes to documents, notes a withdrawal from documentary participation towards the middle years of this century, and a reluctance to contribute manuscripts and information to outsiders.[3] By this time the number of scholars ferreting out and translating manuscripts had diminished and that efficacious combination of Maori and Pakeha interest which marked the earlier decades (as evident in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*) was less apparent. However, the fifties and sixties saw the Maori language on its way to being recognised in Pakeha educational and academic circles. A revived interest in this material brought with it a new scholarly manuscript research which paid tribute to the original document, taking it in its entirety and not refining it according to moral or literary conventions. Such publications as *Maori Marriage* by Bruce Biggs and Margaret Orbell's *Maori Folktales* exemplify this. It is, of course, impossible to estimate how much writing in Maori has gone on over the last twenty years. However, texts in Maori continue to be written, continue to be offered to and used by researchers, and continue to be accessioned by libraries, although not in the quantity which marked earlier years.

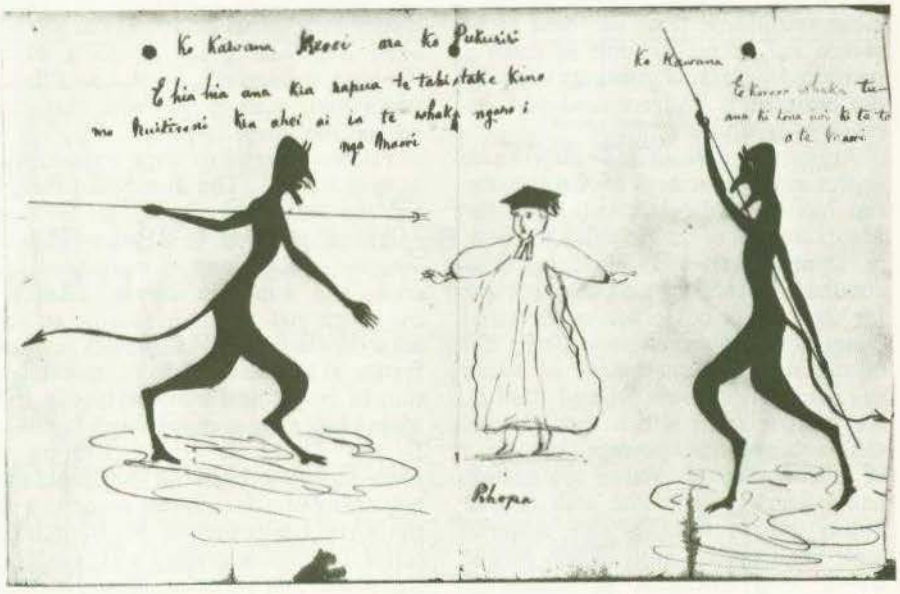
The institutions: a user's critique

In the partial transition from an oral to a written transmission of traditional knowledge that has occurred over the last 150 years, Maori people have produced much valuable manuscript material. These texts are of special value to Maori people as part of their history; they are also valuable to a rising number of Pakeha researchers. It is important, therefore, that the existence of manuscripts which have reached our public institutions is made known to *both* these 'consumers' so that material can be utilised, and, if desired, new material contributed. It is also important that preservation, arrangement and access to manuscripts, in accord with the origin and nature of the material, are assured by the skills which trained archivists and librarians bring to bear. It has not always been the case that these objectives have been met.

In assessing the treatment of Maori manuscripts in our archival institutions, three major criticisms can be made. Firstly, not enough money or time has been allocated to even the large collections, that is, in terms of employment of qualified staff or the provision of concise catalogues or descriptive inventories. Secondly, notification and display of collections are minimal, with the result that many people remain unaware of this material — often those who would be most eager to use it and most competent to advise on its content. Thirdly, justice has not been done to the Maori context of the material, that is, to the cultural elements and conventions which give the texts their distinctive qualities. While it is true that in the last three to four years some libraries have commenced work on Maori material with useful results, these criticisms merit discussion in considering directions for future work.

The quantity of Maori manuscripts that has arrived in libraries and archives at the instigation of Pakeha collectors and enthusiasts is considerable; the amount that has been acquired through Maori deposit is considerably less. We have, therefore, some collections of Maori manuscripts which, in title at least, reflect the Pakeha collectors, for example, the Grey Collection or the John White papers. This has served to disguise the Maori content of these collections. Furthermore, since the Maori language is not an accepted part of libraries' and archives' systems, and it is very rare for native speakers or staff qualified in the Maori language to be responsible for Maori material, the arrangement of manuscripts in terms of cataloguing and description of contents has not been efficient. Taking into account the inherent difficulties of any manuscript research, access to Maori manuscripts in public institutions involves more confusion and chance than should be necessary, especially since these documents derive from this country and the expertise for their explication is right here. The National Archives, for example, have Maori material resulting from public and government offices; descriptive data concerning it is meagre. There is a great deal of unidentified Maori material in their possession and there is a need for specification of it in existing inventories. On the whole libraries and archives do not orientate their finding aids to Maori researchers (or, alternatively, researchers of Maori). If you go to a library catalogue, for instance, and look up 'Ngaapuhi' or 'Maamari' you are unlikely to be as well informed as you would be looking up 'Northland'. The key topics of Maori interest have long gone unrecognised by cataloguers and the description of manuscripts has not be pertinent to the Maori content.

Apart from showing unconcern for



From a sketch-book in the Alexander Turnbull Library. Gilbert Mair wrote in the front of the book: 'Maori sketches illustrating dreams by Aporo shot by me at Poripori Jan 23 1867 under a waterfall I took the sketches wet with his blood from his body.' In this drawing, the two devils flanking the Bishop represent Governor Grey. The left-hand caption says that he is looking for a plan to exterminate the Maori and on the right it implies that while pretending to be their friend he is informing on them by reporting their military strength to the Government.

the material, frustrating researchers and creating greater demands on personnel, sketchy catalogues and descriptions of contents have resulted in excessive handling of manuscripts. This is particularly undesirable when in most cases no 'safe' copy (microfilm or xerox) of even significant collections has been made. A Maori-texts copying project was envisaged by the Turnbull Library in 1979 but deferred because of lack of funds. Some material in the Grey Collection in the Auckland Public Library is on microfilm because of work done by the Mormon Church; xerox copies of a few articles have also been made. Many libraries permit xerox copies of manuscripts to be taken by researchers, leaving the originals to bear the brunt of wear and tear in the library. Priority should be given to the allocation of funds for copying projects.

The existence of manuscripts in Maori has been little acknowledged or publicised. If you go into most major New Zealand libraries you would not know, without some searching, that material in Maori (manuscript or otherwise) is in there — it is not part of our national archival front. For example, the Auckland Public Library makes no mention of Maori manuscript material in its leaflet publicising the Library's facilities, although other special collections in the Library are advertised. Moreover, although the Rare Books Room includes special conditions for display of rare items, no exhibition of Maori material has been held in it. While it would be necessary to make careful selection of material for display — in view of the fact that some traditional texts are held to be sacred and access to some of them is restricted — lack of publicity suggests the material is under-valued and ensures it is under-utilised.

Arguably the most unfortunate aspect in the treatment of Maori material has been the inattention to the Maori context of the material. Certainly some libraries fulfil the special conditions Maori owners may request for their texts but other unrestricted material is not served so well. By not taking into account the life in which the manuscripts were formed, that is, the culture from which they derive, the chance to index perceptively topics of importance to Maori researchers has been lost, and the attitudes of Maori people towards this material have been passed over. When people travel long distances in search of information concerning their family or tribal histories and find that meaningful keys to such information (like the names of their tribes, sub-tribes, canoes, or ancestors) do not appear in catalogues and that their language and manuscript heritage are low in status, it is unlikely that they will want to use such a place to store their own material. This inattention may have jeopardised libraries' and archives' chances of continuing to preserve Maori material. Some tribal bodies are now proposing the establishment of their own archives.

The criticism of neglect is borne out by searches of journals of library and archival professional associations which reveal scant or no mention of Maori manuscript collections. Few, if any, articles draw attention to the existence of these items, or even mention them as a problem. Since, as Wilfred Smith has put it, archives are 'essential elements of the cultural heritage, preserving and transmitting to future generations the collective experience of mankind and fostering a distinct national identity',[4] this reticence cannot be commended. Although the quantity of Maori material may be small in comparison with other collections, its quality and cultural importance mark it for particular attention. The problem has long since been brought to the notice of the profession. Michael Hitchings commented in this journal in 1968:

> New Zealand history is concerned as much with the Maori as with the European, and there is much material written in Maori in our specialist historical collections. It is unfortunate, however, that not one of these collections appears ever to have had a competent Maori linguist on its staff, with the result that this material has remained largely unknown and unused, and to a degree its actual arrangement in those collections is a barrier to its use.[5]

He suggested as a priority that some device needed to be found 'to attract even one Maori reader to a New Zealand collection'. That was fifteen years ago. Can it be said that his advice has been heeded?

Encouragingly, to some extent, the answer is 'yes'. The Turnbull Library led the way by creating, in 1979, a specialist position to develop Maori-language collections as a national resource for scholarly research. Resulting work has been invaluable to researchers and has manifested respect for the material. In addition an exhibition of books and manuscripts in the Maori language was mounted in 1981. In the Auckland Public Library a three-month project in 1980 saw the beginning of a descriptive inventory of the Grey Collection of Maori manuscripts; a similar project will continue the work this summer. The Hocken Library has had translations made of some of its manuscript holdings and this work is to be continued in 1983. A nine-month work project recently completed in the Auckland Institute and Museum Library was devoted to the compilation of a tribal catalogue of manuscript material; an index of names from one collection of genealogies was also completed. The Library is committed to further work of this kind using suitably qualified staff. It is admirable that some libraries, in the face of diminishing resources, have taken advantage of special funding to begin this work, but there is no room for complacency when it is long overdue. For many libraries a full-time specialist position for Maori manuscripts is not necessary. Nevertheless it should be assured that part-time projects are not piecemeal projects and that work is maintained in the future.

To temper my earlier criticisms, it is indeed true that library and archive staff work conscientiously and willingly to the best of their ability to assist researchers of Maori material. However, these manuscripts deserve more than the goodwill of a few staff; they deserve the considered and long-term commitment of archival bodies. We must also remember that until recent years the status of the language in the country as a whole has been low. This has meant that libraries and archives have not been pressured by demands on material to improve its arrangement. In addition, archival work has progressed slowly in New Zealand, the Archives and Records Association of archivists and specialist librarians having been formed only in 1977. Wilfred Smith suggested that the slow development of archives could be related to 'a general lack of interest on the part of governments, the general public and even the academic community, which in other countries has been a vigorous advocate of the need for provision of archives as an important resource for research.'[6] Perhaps, then, there is a collective responsibility to Maori materials. If, however, it is agreed that institutions have in the past not completely met their obligations to researchers and depositors of Maori material, they need now to seek solutions to rectify this, to create effective liaison between the Maori people, librarians, archivists, and researchers, and to ensure that future treatment of this material is worthy.

Conclusion

Maori people create and value their manuscript texts as part of their living tradition; librarians, archivists and researchers esteem them as vital documents in the life of the country. All are concerned with giving special protection to them and preserving them, but they express that concern in different ways. As a culture the Pakeha are accustomed to the collection and preservation of public and private documents in separate institutions. There are distinctively Maori methods too of documentation and preservation of the traditional knowledge which is primarily the topic of the manuscript texts in question. If the increased respect for collections shown by some libraries in the last few years indicates that they are serious in their intentions for Maori manuscripts, and that they

believe they can in future be repositories for more of this material, then the most effective move they could make would be to incorporate the Maori viewpoint in the acquisition and treatment of material.

The transmission of Maori historical knowledge continues orally; manuscripts contribute only in part to that transmission. Traditional knowledge in manuscript texts represents a part of a living tradition — a continuum of past and present. Therefore texts are often held close to that tradition (for example, within family or tribal territory) and are accorded a respect in some cases amounting to awe. It is likely that *tapu* (sacredness) will be associated with the transmission of knowledge — whatever its transport. Because of the sacred or spiritual nature of manuscripts of traditional knowledge and their emotional attachment to them, Maori owners may be concerned about allowing texts into public institutions for general use for fear they are used inappropriately.[7] Accordingly, deposit of material may include restrictions as to who may use it, and the discovery of texts in a library may require a short ceremony before handling of material or may produce the expression of great emotion. These are the sorts of practices that libraries and archives must be prepared to accept.

Understanding of how material should be treated, however, can only be learnt from those most conversant with traditional knowledge — the tribal elders. Consequently if librarians and archivists wish to comprehend the mores which attach to Maori manuscripts they must go out into the Maori community. Points of contact are many — tribal bodies, the Department of Maori Affairs, or the Ruunanga nui mo te Reo Maaori (councils of elders in each tribal region working on all aspects of the language) — and the Maori saying 'He kanohi i kitea' ('a face which is seen') intimates that personal presence is appreciated more and is more effective than letters, pamphlets or telephone calls. By informing people of material concerning their tribes, acknowledging their knowledge by consulting them for help, and describing the role of archival institutions, the sensitivities, skills and interests of all will be taken into account.

Within institutions, displays and information regarding collections will serve to promote the literary and intellectual activity of the Maori people which is greatly underrated in the community at large. Employment of appropriately qualified staff (for example, people to deal with their own tribal material) will ensure that Maori opinion and custom are respected, and will provide the vital topics of interest for catalogues. Continued exchanges with university departments, language teachers and researchers will also fund the account of knowledge of these texts.

The importance of Maori manuscript literature has been brought into prominence by scholarly translations and publications and is being increasingly acknowledged by a variety of researchers. The perception of that importance is no doubt shared by librarians and archivists, but it has not always been made obvious in their presentation of Maori manuscript holdings. The promotion of greater knowledge, understanding and co-operation among all parties owning, holding and using these documents will ensure they are more readily available, carefully and properly preserved, and appreciated for their true value.

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